

## Research Questions and Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes are hard to think and write about: they are a bizarre genre. Simultaneously part of the “doing” of fieldwork and of the “writing” of ethnography, fieldnotes are shaped by two movements: a turning away from academic discourse to join conversations in unfamiliar settings, and a turning back again. (Lederman, 1990, p. 72)

As Molly reflected on her own learning, she saw clearly how she was going to bring focus to her research. She read, listened to Roger, looked more carefully, and decided that setting more guidelines and deadlines for herself would give her the feeling she was moving forward.

“It’s not failing; it’s just not practicing enough. People will lose patience after like 10 minutes.”

“[I] knew what it felt like, and [I’d] try to emulate that again.”

“Standing is almost impossible. [I] have to walk to keep up momentum.”

Roger kept setting challenges for himself so that he never became too comfortable with his achievements. Molly found purpose and direction for her times of observing and talking with Roger. Now she could focus, plan better use of her time with Roger, and keep in mind the give-and-take of asking and

answering questions of herself and her fieldnotes. Molly’s conceptual memos became her way of talking to herself and making evident what her findings were as she went along.

In this chapter, we move through the footwork of doing ethnographic research. We start with ideas of ways to shape preliminary versions of fieldwork that go into a proposal or grant application. We then move through strategies and tactics of managing fieldnotes and channeling their essence into *conceptual memos* that keep track of what the fieldworker learns from week to week.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

It may seem surprising for “research questions” to appear after a discussion of field entry, tools, time and space decisions, and your own work as an instance of ethnography. As noted earlier, we believe curiosity lies behind the work of most ethnographers. But curiosity does not transfer smoothly into specific questions. However, looking ahead at the field site, selecting subtopics for literature reviews, setting time frames, and making decisions about how you will operate in the field will bring manageable questions into focus.

Let’s look at an example. You have a broad interest in the language socialization that takes place when adults switch roles or jobs, and you want to find a context for studying language and other modalities in this kind of adult language learning. Moreover, you have been drawn into the debates about organic food and the rapid increase in the number of organic farmers in England, Europe, and the United States. You are especially curious about how first-generation organic farm communities break with the past and take on a new identity.

Your plan of work forces you to address questions such as these: Will the study take place on one or more small or large farms and in which geographic region(s)? Will the study be comparative and involve only independent farmers or a collection of farmers who work as part of an agribusiness? Which prior

convictions (e.g., as a vegetarian, farmer's daughter, or longtime community gardener) do you bring? What is realistic in terms of your location of residence and physical sites available to you for the study? How will you collect your data (combination of survey, interview, observation only or with some participation)? What do you already know about organic farming, its technical terminology, and the legal rules and definitions of "certified organic" in different markets where farmers might ship their produce?

Careful consideration of matters such as these allow you to locate yourself, refine what you know and need to know, and decide how you can realistically undertake the research that interests you. Research questions that emerge after such an initial self-analysis will be based on considerations of spatial, temporal, role, and data collection processes, as well as both academic and practical literatures that need ongoing review.

But bear in mind that even after you begin fieldwork, demands of your personal life will keep modifying research questions. Think, for example, in the study introduced above, of how time demands of fieldwork can conflict with your family obligations. Once you begin fieldwork, you realize that though more time in the field will be possible in the autumn, the time you planned for winter and spring has to be cut back, and your summer site visits will have to be only intermittent.

Research questions now need to be refined. A focus on the transition from conventional to organic farmer can be accomplished through intensive fieldwork in the autumn season when most farm owners begin implementing their plans for switching from conventional to organic. Refined research questions must reflect a focus on language change during these times of transition. In the autumn months, you will devote your time primarily to fieldnotes, audiotaping, and interviews on site.

While away from the field site, you should examine the multimodalities of documents used to socialize conventional farmers during their transition to organic. Contradictions and disagreements between "official" literatures and the popular press will push you to plan specific areas to discuss later with

farmers. Documentary films, promotional materials, and news and feature items in the public press should also supplement your site-based data collection.

Targets of focus to be addressed during winter and spring return site visits will emerge. For example, technical, legal, and popular materials on the transition from conventional to organic farming make evident highly specific techniques and reporting processes critical to fulfilling legal requirements for certification. Observations during the autumn show large blocks of time required to respond to these externally imposed demands. How do these tasks fit into the frantic pace demanded in late winter and early spring when ordering seeds, planting, and weeding begin? How did the socialization to the vocabulary involved in technical processes, specific agencies, and bureaucratic procedures carry through in later months of the season?

### *Be Concise*

Every academic knows the importance of saying clearly and concisely what the subject and process of research will be. However, brevity and clarity do not follow easily after literature reviews and considerable absorption in planning data collection. We suggest that every ethnographer try out central questions; ask them of yourself. Then sketch your plan of fieldwork with "critical friends." For example, for the organic farming language socialization project sketched above, friends and family may show interest in central questions stated along the following lines:

Organic farming is on the increase everywhere. In the United States, small farmers in some states are switching in large numbers to organic farming. I'm interested in how they get up to speed on the necessary technicalities in the short autumn period before they have to buy their seeds, plan, prepare the soil, and plant during the winter and spring. I've been able to talk at some length to several farmers in a county in Vermont



who want to transition from conventional farming to organic. They say they have no idea what learning to "be organic" is really going to entail. They've agreed that during the autumn, I can go to their meetings, spend a couple of days each week with their families, and learn as much as I can about how they come to think and talk "organic." I want to know what they read, watch, and use as they prepare not only the layout of their gardens or farms but also their business plans. Then I'll go back less frequently in the winter and spring to see what their studying of all processes of turning organic means in their most critical months. Who knows, maybe I'll even find out something that those who are preparing farmers to learn how to become "certified organic" might use to make their teaching and preparation of materials more effective in the long run!

The ethnographer might at various points during such an exposition ask a "critical friend" to comment on the value of the questions, validity of the approach, feasibility of actually "finding out" such things from busy and committed people, and so on. Nonspecialists these days frequently evoke the very questions anthropologists with their newfound reflexivity need to address:

- How do you know they won't just tell you what they think you want to know?
- Aren't you interfering with the data by being on site?
- If it's only one site, how can you make any generalizations?

Such comments from critical friends enable ethnographers to become comfortable about what they truly want to know and can accomplish in the planned research. Ethnography can teach us a lot, but we also need to know its limits and constraints and anticipate how our "findings" might be received.

### *Disrupt Dichotomies*

Ethnographers, particularly those in fields such as education where certain categories and dichotomies have firm

standing, need to take special precautions. For example, ethnographers who study institutions of formal education can fall into using dichotomies to delineate sites, styles, and situations of communication use. Most of these fail to acknowledge the cultural nature of human development and ways in which all learners, young and mature, look, listen, imitate, reshape, and transmit within learning environments that they themselves define through their own motivations and needs.

Nowhere is the proactive work of directing one's own learning environments more evident than among those learners positioned on the margins (whether through racial, socioeconomic, age, or linguistic barriers). When we begin to note how much learning goes on in play, for example, we have to question the teacher/student dichotomy that dominates studies that take place within classrooms and schools. Such an approach might miss the deeper cultural processes that take place within other relationships and forms of behavior like play, such as moral reasoning, socialization to competition, strategy development, and interpretation of ambiguities (Goodwin, 1990; Roulleau-Berger, 2003; Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Anthropologists have long warned of the ethnocentric bias that lies behind the dichotomy of *formal/informal*. First is the expectation that adults are those who shape *formal* environments, and all contexts without direction by adults therefore seem to carry the designation of *informal*. This notion is shaped by the centralized focus in Western psychology and sociology (as well as the modernization paradigm) on family and school as the primary learning environments.

Yet increasingly, as we come to gain knowledge about peer socialization and life-span learning, we understand that such dichotomies do not hold and that neither families nor schools today can fully carry out responsibilities traditionally expected. With demands on facts and skills exponentially increasing and instruction time decreasing, schools cannot be the sole providers of technical, interface, and organizational knowledge for future workers/citizens. Moreover, as other labor markets compete for workers with technical and professional knowledge,

schools are left with teachers whose expertise cannot keep pace with highly specialized knowledge, especially in rapidly changing fields, such as the sciences.

Moreover, school budgets for extracurricular learning opportunities (in arts, sports, etc.) have disappeared or decreased in even the world's wealthiest nations. Thus what used to be regarded as "informal" learning within the space of schools is no longer widely available. In addition, even when after-school provision is available, teachers and assistants or volunteers in these situations generally lack the professional knowledge needed to match student needs for technical know-how. With two-working-parents and single-parent households in Western nations, families have decreasing amounts of time with their young. For the after-school hours of their children, families with disposable incomes turn to "intimate strangers" (e.g., child-care providers, sports and arts coaches, and paid specialized teachers) for lessons or classes ranging from piano to karate to children's theater.

Moreover, peer socialization, generally thought to be highly informal, turns out to follow with close examination, a range of organizational characteristics. Games, as well as spontaneous interactions, can be highly formal, ritualized, and tightly structured, often governed by goals, operational strategies, and rules of correction (e.g., Goodwin, 1990). From the developing world as well as postindustrial societies come thousands of studies of learners who organize themselves for certain occasions, needs, or roles into what outsiders must surely see as formal arrangements. Consider, for example, the tightly ruled world through which groups of the young engage in multiparty video games.

A further expectation shaping the *formal/informal* dichotomy involves spatial arrangements and institutional history. Here again, cross-cultural studies of children and youth from various regions of the world, including postindustrial societies, contradict this view. Formality can mark all kinds of different spaces, as the trend of the past two decades for formal weddings in the park reveal. In these cases, the formality generally

reserved for within buildings owned by religious institutions moves outdoors. Similarly, highly informal activities can mark spaces generally reserved only for the most formal of procedures and the embodiment of authority (e.g., scientific research laboratories; cf. Latour & Woolgar, 1986).

Finally, the idea of *informal* implies the absence of direct or verbal instruction and demonstration, while *formal* suggests an authority who instructs verbally from a given body of knowledge and with predictable skills (cf. Henze, 1992). More and more, as all users of the Internet can attest, learners across ages become autodidacts, and dominance of an oral set of directions from a single authority vanishes. Visual and auditory signals (e.g., the computer's bleep that indicates an attempted click is futile), as well as trial and error or observation of another, dominate modes of learning.

The multiplicity of learning sources is characteristic of all contexts where learners are guided primarily by what they themselves believe they want or need to know. We often forget, in the face of the dichotomy of *formal/informal*, how retrieval of random information collected through casual exposure is quickly activated by a current real need. All work on sustained learning in community-based organizations as well as across-the-life-span learning situations indicates such is the case.

Key to such learning is critique based on agreed-upon standards of quality and depth of information. Finding enough information to meet instrumental and immediate goals may be acceptable without critique. However, expert experience and judgment become necessary for sustained learning and advancement. Here, for example, community-based organizations that offer long-term meaningful engagement for young people do their best to enlist adults who are experts in their fields—whether dance, instrumental music, agronomy, or social entrepreneurship. Their interactions with young learners do not match usual notions of "informal" or "formal."

In particular, learning is associated with observation and a real (as distinct from realistic) sense of participation with regard to the intensity of observation, willingness to make



efforts, and openness to failure (for cases, see Heath & Smyth, 1999; Maira & Soep, 2005; Rogoff, 2003). These responsibilities include demonstration, verbal instruction, modeling and mentoring roles, judgment by external critics and through comparative experiences, and ongoing advancement and rising in-group challenges. Researching such learning processes and the relationships and meanings associated with them in local situations can be a major contribution of ethnography, whose strength is precisely that it can help us move beyond the simple dichotomies, such as *formal/informal*, which we encounter in popular media and writings about pedagogy.

A final point about the ethnographer's research questions. They must be of such a nature that they can be answered through *empirical* evidence. This dictum rules out questions that center around value judgments, pet beliefs or "theories," and normative terms that have standard usage in other fields. To ask if one set of socialization practices is "better" than another is to rule out application of empirical evidence from ethnographic fieldwork. "Better" for what, for whom, or under which circumstances must be delineated in quantifiable and specifiable terms instead.

To want to "prove" one's "theory" of why something happens the way it does cannot be the motivation for ethnography. The ethnographer studying organic farmers' language socialization cannot set out to "show" that those who undertake such a change are smarter or more civic-minded than conventional farmers. Empirical facts applicable here could include sociodemographic data on highest education level achieved or number of local political offices sought by both kinds of farmers in a certain region. But "proof" of the a priori value judgments noted above would still not be achieved.

### FIELDNOTES

The history of social, cultural, and linguistic anthropology resides largely in fieldnotes of individual ethnographers. Col-

lections of such notes make fascinating reading, as do individuals' accounts of just how they recorded ongoing interactions (cf. Sanjek, 1990). Rarely, however, do such accounts indicate the fieldworker's means of grasping while in the midst of collecting data what fieldnotes taken over a specific period of time might mean. We recommend *conceptual memos* for this purpose.

We assume here that ethnographers keep their observations and accounts of interactions in notebooks and supplement these with digital audiorecordings onto their computer. We strongly recommend that after each field visit, ethnographers download their digital recordings and ensure that time, location, and names of interactants are in place for each recording session. We also recommend that, at weekly or other regular intervals, ethnographers review fieldnotes, log recordings, and write *conceptual memos*. Some ethnographers keep their fieldnotes separate from their reflections, projections, and reminders to themselves. Others arrange each page of fieldnotes in several columns, noting logistics in one, fieldnotes in another, and reflective material in another. See below for an example of Brian's fieldnotes from a project on home/school numeracy practices.

Ethnographers studying language and other modes tend to include, at a minimum, the following in their fieldnotes:

1. Running account of events in real time
2. Notable short phrases uttered by interlocutors so that audio- or videorecordings can more easily be coordinated with fieldnotes
3. Changes in audience, routines, rituals, and features of context that co-occur with shifts in language and modes.

Brian, in a field study on mathematics practices at home (Street, Baker, & Tomlin, 2005), used columns for separating straight data from his comments and reflections as he recorded events. His data are reproduced in Table 4.1 just as he recorded them.

**Table 4.1.** Brian Street's Report on Mountford (Mo) home visits: April 13, 2001. Kerry (in Class 1), Mother (M), Father (F), Teacher (T), and Cathy (age 13). A similar table is published in Street et al., 2005, pp. 185–187. All names are pseudonyms.

1. 11 A.M. Home: M welcomed me into sitting room: M, Kerry and Cathy (aged 13, elder sister, at Uplands school), plus three men—Kerry's F, who drives a truck for the Council (it was parked outside) plus two other workers in their yellow jackets (in their twenties), in 12 x 12 room. The TV was on, plus a small screen for a play station that Kerry and her sister were playing with. I was not invited to sit down, and all the chairs were full, so I remained standing the whole hour, occasionally kneeling beside Kerry to look at the screen. I gave M our letter, and she said the teacher had already raised the question of our coming, with which she was happy. I explained I might come every few weeks over the next year, and she said fine.	In long street just above school, off main boundary road, not in heart of estate.  Preliminary visit to get feel of "home" and signal questions to M for future, e.g., own numeracy memories, e.g., school to home; home num and lit; relation to school. Couldn't take notes so this is from memory immediately afterwards.
2. School to home: M volunteered a worksheet that Mr D had sent home—two pages of word lists that he asked her to work through, asking Kerry to name opposites. I asked if the school sent any numeracy work like this home, but she said no. M commented that school had now made rules that parents couldn't come in, which meant they didn't get to see the teacher except briefly in the playground or at parents' evenings—she had been to one recently where the T had given her the handout. School sends books home for parents to read with children: Kerry keeps dodging this, and T said at parents' evening M must try to get it going again—she agreed to me she will try next term. Committed to working with Kerry on school stuff but doesn't really know much of what goes on in school—Kerry seldom tells her much. Keen for her to do well and keeps saying she is doing OK (elder sister, Cathy, had learning problems and is now at Uplands—Special School. Cathy keeps reminding us that Kerry is only a baby and so can't do tasks that she can . . .)	Reinforces notion of school as focusing more on literacy/language work in relation to home than on numeracy? Or is the home finding this easier to accommodate?  Like all carers we have seen, Kerry's parents are eager to support their child's schoolwork, though they are not clear what it involves.
3. Home numeracy practices: calendar on wall (squares with number for each day) with days crossed out: over it was a monthly calendar with a line for each day, and this was Kerry's: she consulted her mother's calendar for the days crossed out and then ticked/crossed that day on her own calendar. A clock in the form of a large wrist watch was on the wall, and Kerry named the numbers that the small and large hands were pointing to. She also watches TV and knows the times of programmes.  Relations around numeracy, etc.: M asks Kerry questions for my sake, to confirm claims M has made about her knowledge and interests: presses her a bit but generally Kerry is responsive. Kerry keen to show me her playstation activity, so occasionally checks that I am following (caught between sustaining conversation with M and following/being attentive to Kerry). M keen to help Kerry, e.g. M's description of working through worksheet with her as an encouraging task.	Home numeracy practices—does school recognize and build on these?

Wolcott (2001) and others recommend a similar separation of data from reflections, especially when sharing data among several members of a research team. When actual data can be lined up for the same stretch of time, ethnographers can most easily address questions about patterns, relevant theories, and perceptions of occurrences on a particular day. Members of Brian's team would discuss one another's fieldnotes and pick up reflections from the right-hand column for consideration in future visits.

The mention of the playstation, for instance, raised the question for the team as to how far they should pursue questions associated with new technologies that they frequently encountered in their home visits. In the end, the team decided that, interesting though this topic was, their focus was more precisely on everyday numeracy practices, and they would note computer use only as it related to these. To do otherwise ran the risk of turning the project into a "home computer" study. Such in-the-field decisions relate not only to prior literatures reviewed but also to resource and time constraints. The two-column method of recording data addresses such questions and feeds usefully into the content of conceptual memos.

### CONCEPTUAL MEMOS

Written each week in connection with logs of recorded data, *conceptual memos* need not be more than five or six pages. Yet they should be as their title suggests: a memo to the ethnographer about generic ideas that come from particular events, along with queries raised in the reflections column of fieldnotes.

For the sake of efficiency, place the following information in the upper left-hand corner of the first page: name of researcher (especially in collaborative work), dates of period covered by memo, sites included, and primary activities or scenarios observed.



Shirley recommends that three sections follow. Titled "Problems and Setbacks," this first section is especially important in research teams, for it briefly indicates unexpected occurrences (e.g., stolen equipment, death in community, etc.). The second section, entitled "Overview," indicates hours in the field, physical locations, and primary sources of data (e.g., conversations of interactive groups or individual interviews).

Entitled "Patterns, Insights, and Breakthroughs," the final section constitutes the heart of the memo. Here the ethnographer hones in on patterns detected, insights or trends, and "aha!" realizations. These should not repeat material from prior memos, for when the ethnographer writes the final product from the research, all these memos will be read as cumulative.

An excerpt from a conceptual memo written by Adelma Roach, one of the ethnographers who worked with Shirley in her long-term study of arts-focused youth organizations, follows:

Something I observed is the way the staff refers to involvement of the youth. In an article in the *Christian Science Monitor*, James [pseudonym for an older member of organization Adelma was studying] was quoted as saying: "We selected teens we felt could be best served by the program." Another pamphlet about the project highlights how teens will be "empowered" through the work they do. . . . While both statements are accurate and important, I wonder what [name of organization] would say about how the young people themselves actually serve and empower the organization. In other words, what are young people giving to the organization that adults would not? How much room for youth involvement and service to the organization itself is there at all levels of planning and work?

The memo continues with several instances and transcript portions in which the young people adopted roles that changed the dynamics of the current work. Adelma wrote:

One young woman took on the role of "tour guide" in a visit to one of the work sites of the program, dancing, singing, and talking. She turned to the group at one point: "You guys coming or what? I'm giving the grand tour here. I had to take in lots of information to do this." Everyone laughed and followed on. In another instance, a member of the team was asked to give a weather report. He adopted the persona of a local weatherman and led the group into facing what was to be a hot, humid day through laughter and cheers. . . . The young people come to life when they give me advice about how I'm doing and extend the knowledge they've been taught to me as novice. This process of transfer of information and shift in relations and positioning is useful in understanding contexts of learning and the roles of assessment and critique they serve within the organization.

Ethnographers who maintain their conceptual memos on a regular basis find that when they plan their final written report, chapter topics fall into place through a phrase or word search of conceptual memos. Themes, trends, and insights become chapters and their subheadings in the final dissertation or book.

### SUMMARY

Molly soon realized she was no longer standing still but gaining momentum. With each new occasion of watching Roger and listening to him, she felt more comfortable, as though she had caught on to how to turn back to the literature, then to her fieldnotes and recordings, and then back again to new readings. A breakthrough came when she returned to a chapter on waitressing (from Rose, 2004) she had read earlier. Unlike waitresses, who strongly identify their role in the specific physical space of their restaurant, shop, or bar, Roger had no such location reinforcement for his identity. His own body was the physical space of his identity. This small switch enabled Molly

to zero in on the multiplicity of ways that Roger talked about where and how his body was in space, not only in juggling, but also in walking or doing other daily activities.

Every conceptual memo revealed to her how ideas were cohering. Molly became more convinced that the knowledge she was gaining could be useful to others. She began writing, analyzing transcripts and fieldnotes, going back to conceptual memos, returning to literature reviews, and then reviewing sections of her fieldnotes and interviews. The final product was falling into place. Her conceptual memos had mapped the locations of data that now cohered for theory development.

## CHAPTER 5

# Analysis and Coming Home from the Field

For an ethnographer everything is a matter of one thing leading to another, that to a third, and that to one hardly knows what. (Geertz, 1995, p. 20)

As Molly analyzed her fieldnotes, she kept seeing Geertz's words come true. At one point, in reviewing her conceptual memos, she realized that Roger's comments seemed to grow in contradictions. Her fieldnotes, audiotapes, transcripts, and piles of photographs yielded not one or two reassuring patterns but several. She decided to turn again to more reading of literature reviews, where she picked up ideas related to the back-and-forth nature of learning as well as to the challenge for individuals of settling into their work.

She also realized that the questions she asked Roger at certain points had helped push his meta-framing of juggling actions. Roger's technical descriptors such as "flat pattern on a plane" or "alternating outward passes" came in later talks with him more frequently, along with emotional assessments of his process as "fun," "exciting," or "like a mystery." Sweeping generalizations kept company with tiny details about certain tactics he used.

"I was too excited after I got it to spend the time and actually look up technique."

"Four balls—that I looked up online to get the general pattern . . . and the pattern was much easier because I could comprehend three balls."